



## **Final Report**

### **BELARUS: ASSISTANCE FOR ELECTION OBSERVATION TO HELP PREVENT FRAUD (04858)**

**USAID Cooperative Agreement No. DGC-A-00-01-0004-00**

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#### **I. SUMMARY**

Belarus is the most repressive country of the former Soviet Union. After a brief hopeful period in the early 1990s, Belarus has moved in an increasingly authoritarian direction over the last eight years. President Alexander Lukashenko has taken aggressive action to stifle the activities of Belarusian political opposition parties and civil society groups. President Lukashenko was responsible for the flawed parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000 and 2001, respectively. Particularly ominous was the president's announcement in early October that a constitutional referendum would be placed on the October 2004 parliamentary ballot that would overturn constitutional provisions and allow President Lukashenko to run for a third term.

Within this context, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) worked with political parties to implement an observation of the parliamentary elections and constitutional referendum in October. NDI trained partisan pollwatchers to monitor the "early voting" period – the five days in which voters unable to come to the polls on election day are allowed to vote, October 12-16 – and election day itself, October 17. The intensive training program commenced in September and concluded shortly before the early voting period began. The seminars were perceived by both NDI and the political parties as successful.

As a result of these activities, political parties were able to participate more actively in the electoral process. Since fraud was so widespread, it is uncertain whether and to what degree the partisan pollwatchers were able to reduce or deter electoral abuses. The pollwatchers, however, were through this training program better able to document fraud and contribute their observations to the various organizations collecting and analyzing such data. Reports from independent observers showed that there was a significant presence of partisan pollwatchers at the polls although, as it was the parties' responsibility to field the pollwatchers, cannot ascertain the exact number of pollwatchers deployed during the election period.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

NDI has conducted political party training programs in Belarus since 2000. The Institute's initial work focused on assisting democratic forces in Belarus to develop their organizations and prepare for the September 2001 presidential election. NDI political party experts conducted workshops in Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland on campaign skills development and coalition building. NDI collaborated closely in 2001 with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus to provide technical and financial support to Independent Observation, a coalition of domestic election monitors. NDI staff in both Minsk and the regions assisted domestic observers in every aspect of their missions, from recruitment of monitors, to media events, to conducting a parallel vote tabulation of election results. Recently, NDI has worked with the most promising leaders of the 2001 monitoring effort to create Partnership, a domestic election monitoring organization with the potential to become a national grassroots advocate for democracy and government accountability.

In early 2004, the formation of a coalition of opposition political parties, the Five Plus Coalition, prior to the 2004 parliamentary elections demonstrated that political activists and have begun to take serious steps toward increasing their competitiveness despite Belarus' repressive political environment. The Five Plus Coalition not only included opposition political parties, but also nongovernmental institutions. The alliance was intended to coordinate activities planned by both sectors with regard to the parliamentary elections. On July 15, 2004, the Coalition confirmed its intention to put forth a single candidate in support of the Five Plus platform in each of the country's 110 election districts.

As expected, the government pulled from its arsenal of administrative resources to silence and restrict the opposition's campaigns. The House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly approved changes to the laws governing political parties' activities prior to the election period, such as banning dual party membership and banning parties from accepting money from foreign private individuals, organizations and companies, stateless persons, anonymous contributors, minors, religious organizations and legal entities registered less than a year before the contribution was made. Further, during the period leading up to the elections, the coalition received threats from the Ministry of Justice for failing to register as an association – a common mechanism used by the Belarusian authorities to shut down nongovernmental groups.

Prior to the election period, local election commissions initially rejected the registration of a large number of candidates. However, following an appeal process, a significant number of opposition candidates won their appeals, were registered and appeared on the ballot. Approximately 20 percent of all opposition candidates for parliament were placed on the ballot, an unexpectedly high percentage. Most of these candidates were then removed during the pre-election period for "administrative reasons". Opposition candidates who remained in the running failed to win a single seat in the parliament. With the exception of the observer team sent by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), all of the international and independent domestic observers declared the election unfree, unfair and patently fraudulent.

Within this difficult environment, NDI's program aimed to:

- equip partisan volunteers from political parties with the skills and knowledge to monitor the early voting period and election day;
- promote more transparent elections;
- help reduce electoral fraud; and
- contribute to dissemination of more comprehensive and accurate information on the conduct of the election.

### **III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

To accomplish its objectives, NDI designed a program to facilitate the preparation and organization of a political party pollwatching effort. The program was organized and conducted by skilled NDI trainers. NDI embraced a range of democratic political parties, including members of the Five Plus Coalition as well as other democratic parties and blocs such as Respublika and Belarus Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hromada).

NDI's trainings were organized by a diverse group of eight experienced Russian-speaking trainers. Training focused on the rights and obligations of party pollwatchers, including how to document fraud and measures to stop violations as they occur. NDI trained approximately 900 individuals to act as pollwatchers. NDI worked closely with democratic political parties to identify a group of activists in each region to be trained on election law and conduct. At the beginning of this process, a training-of-trainers seminar was held for 21 individuals on how to conduct partisan pollwatching seminars. NDI held 31 subsequent training seminars for pollwatchers, the first on September 11 and the last on October 10. NDI hosted approximately half of the seminars outside of Belarus due to security concerns and travel restrictions. The day-long seminars were held in four regional locations outside of Belarus all within a convenient distance from Minsk to minimize disruption to participants' campaign duties: Chyniv, Ukraine; Kyiv, Ukraine; Smolensk, Russia; and Belyastok, Poland.

To supplement the seminars and assist in broadening dissemination of pollwatcher materials, NDI provided all participants with a manual on short-term election observation. The manual detailed the responsibilities and expectations of election monitors (both partisan and nonpartisan) as well as the electoral codes and procedures and a supplemental section on fraud documented in prior Belarusian elections. NDI also worked with participating political parties to ensure efficient deployment of party pollwatchers.

### **IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

*Objective: To equip partisan volunteers from political parties with the skills and knowledge to monitor the early voting period and on election day.*

- Through an initial training-of-trainers seminar, NDI trained 21 partisan volunteers from a host of political parties to act as pollwatching trainers for their parties. These trainers, in turn, successfully trained 900 party members in partisan pollwatching and election monitoring techniques. Of the 21 participants, NDI identified eight individuals

particularly adept at training. NDI has been in contact with these individuals and will begin a longer-term training program for them in more advanced political skills.

*Objective: To promote more transparent elections.*

- 900 NDI- trained pollwatchers were tasked to observe whether their assigned polling stations adhered to elections laws and regulations. As it was the parties' responsibility to field the pollwatchers, NDI cannot ascertain the exact number of pollwatchers deployed during the election period. Reports from independent observers have shown that there was a significant presence of partisan pollwatchers at the polls. The presence of the pollwatchers during the election period contributed to the transparency of the October elections.

*Objective: To help reduce electoral fraud.*

- Qualitative data collected following the elections from the partisan pollwatchers by opposition party leaders were used to contest the official election results in the Belarusian courts. More than 700 complaints of elections violations or abnormalities were filed immediately after the elections.

*Objective: To disseminate observation results to indicate the character of the elections.*

- Political parties were able to disseminate their observers' data via rallies, press releases and interviews.

## **V. EVALUATION**

As a result of these activities, political parties were able to participate more actively in the electoral process. Since fraud was so widespread, it is uncertain whether and to what degree the partisan pollwatchers were able to reduce or deter electoral abuses. The pollwatchers, however, were through this training program better able to document fraud and contribute their observations to the various organizations collecting and analyzing such data. In this way, the partisan pollwatchers contributed to the wider understanding of the 2004 Belarusian elections and constitutional referendum. Through this experience, the participating parties increased their capacity and sharpened their tools to conduct pollwatching in future elections. Moreover, as the participating parties were obliged to cooperate with non-partisan counterparts, the political parties improved their relations with those groups and improved their coordination and organizational skills.

The seminars were perceived by both NDI and the political parties as successful. Following the elections, NDI met with individuals within parties to discuss the trainings and to solicit suggestions on how to make training more effective in the future. NDI has solicited comments from the parties on the problems encountered by partisan pollwatchers during the elections. These comments will inform NDI's planning for training and observation activities surrounding the presidential election expected in 2006. While that may seem far off, rumors are circulating that President Lukashenko may decide to hold the presidential election in 2005

instead of 2006 due to the possible implications the Ukrainian elections could have on Belarus. Should the elections be held in 2005, political parties will have trainers in place as well as the institutional knowledge and experience they gained during the 2004 parliamentary elections and constitutional referendum.